SPECTRUM

PRISM SELLS

'I wanted to put on the advert for this album, "Road Tested On 17 Levels Of Consciousness"'

– Sonic Boom

With Spacemen 3 well and truly behind him, SONIC BOOM returns to the fray with SPECTRUM, a band who love to turn you on. DAVID STUBBS gets wowed. Pics: LIANE HENTSCHER

"NO, I'M NOT ABOUT TO INHERIT THE MR KIPLING FORTUNE."

I wasn't even going to ask. But Sonic Boom, former Spaceman 3 and now leader of Spectrum (his new project that is named after his last solo album), is mildly anxious that no one labours under the impression that he's rolling in ackers, as was inferred from Simon Price's album review a fortnight ago. The picture painted there was that of a bored, decadent aristocrat – a Thomas de Quincey, perhaps – languishing in a sumptuous garret that reeked of opium. I might have expected to have been greeted by some doughty old retainer or a butler at the door: "Master Boom is in the drawing-room chewing cocoa leaves. Whom shall I say is calling?" In fact, he has two rooms in a pleasant house in a village just outside Rugby, among whose other occupants are his parents, a cat and an incontinent dog – in one of whose indoor turds the journalist steps as he leaves the place, much to the amusement of the artist, the press officer, the photographer and the dog.

Sonic's quarters, carpeted with the sort of electric maroon material usually favoured in provincial cinemas, are a boy's bedroom *in extremis*. He has hundreds upon hundreds of toys which are fastidiously arranged over every inch of available shelf space; tiny little kitsch items like the sort of thing you would have found at the bottom of cornflake packets in the Seventies – legions of little plastic monsters, kaleidoscopes and a "Thunderbirds" toy that plays the theme to the wretched show when you hold it up to the light. This enthusiasm for kitschy, op-art playthings is carried over to the sleeve design – the new album, "Soul Kiss (Glide Divine)", features an amorphous mass of turquoise liquid which sloshes about in a plastic container. I think of potential connections between toys, kitsch and psychedelia . . .

"Um . . . I suppose to a certain extent. I suppose a lot of the music I like is quite kitsch, and psychedelia is quite kitsch as music goes. I'm not really a fan of Syd Barrett. I hardly know anything about Pink Floyd, apart from 'Dark Side Of The Moon'."

Certainly, among the arcane devices used on the album is a wind tube. (Remember those coloured plastic tubes you used to wave around your head in the playground, older readers?) Sonic prefers the arcane gadgetry of the Sixties, a pre-techno age before computers spoilt all the fun.

SPECTRUM are Sonic Boom (myriad effects), Richard Formby (guitar), Mike Stout and Geoff Dorkin. They are all friends from the old days, when Spaceman 3 used to be enormously popular in places like Germany, before they ever got a look-in in the music press and before the infamous split, with Jason spiralling off (in acrimonious circumstances) to form the successful Spiritualized. How Sonic feels about his old friend garnering such a reputation while his own profile has been relatively low this past year or so he's not letting on: "Er – no comment. I think that's one to avoid. I wish them well. I'm glad they've been successful, I hope it keeps up for them."

Whatever, he's back with "Soul Kiss (Glide Divine)", which was recorded between June 1990 and March of this year. The single (The Single Of The Week a few weeks back) is a fine fuzzbox manic mantra, fuelled by its own distortion – a grainy, Sixties flashback. Much of the rest of the album is an array of lo-tech noises, mantras, kaleidoscopic patterns, buzzes and drones, blissful and disquieting by turns, floating in and out of the mix like fireflies, as on "Neon Sign" and "Sweet Running Water".

There are moments, as with all Sonic Boom's records, where you forget the record is on, and I can't decide whether that's a good or a bad thing. Brian Eno would certainly regard that as a compliment. Other times, it's like snowflakes gradually multiplying in size to reveal their patterns. Sonic makes no bones about the simplicity of his technique.

"We're actually saying that anyone can do it. You can work off one or two chords, one or two notes, it's more about feeling. What we do is incredibly simple, technically. I wouldn't want to disillusion anyone about that."

The effects, however, are profound. Even in his most faraway moments, Sonic isn't so much moving away from rock'n'roll or spiralling off into more elaborate terrain – rather, he's going deep down into it, investigating its essence and stripping it down to its most minimal constituent. Not three chords, but two chords, even one chord. He listens to all kinds of music, from dub to blues to weird recordings of people letting the air out of tyres, but the music he returns to is Suicide, The Stooges, the Stones and "River Deep, Mountain High" by Ike and Tina Turner.

For Sonic, repetition is paramount. He's fond of quoting a magazine article which explains how "repetition is one of the most powerful means of altering consciousness without drugs".

Certainly, when one looks back at the time when rock was considered subversive, it's intriguing that what worried its anxious detractors as much as, if not more than, its depravity, its sexual licence, its hairiness and its urge to dissent, was the aspect of repetition.

"Repetition is the most powerful way of conveying emotion that I know," says Sonic. "Listen to early Suicide, or reggae. It's the same principle as mantras, where the idea is that, if you repeat something often enough, it loses its original meaning and yields all kinds of other meanings, which eventually depend on the subjective perception of the individual."

But is it necessary to take drugs fully to appreciate Spectrum?

"It's not essential, but it is enhancing. I wanted to put on the advert for this album, 'Road Tested On 17 Levels Of Consciousness'."

This inevitably leads to a discussion of drugs, narcotics and so forth. Aren't all drugs essentially painkillers, anaesthetics against the brutal reality of everyday life? That's why *I* drink alcohol. Isn't the argument against the music of Sonic Boom and Spectrum that it's a mere aural narcotic, an escape? Sonic vigorously refutes this charge. He sees Spectrum as exploratory rather than escapist, and regards some drugs in the same manner.

"Drugs can improve your life – seeing things, sampling different levels of consciousness, it's a form of self-improvement. Drugs like acid really help you to see yourself and look hard at the society that you live in, the history of the society that you live in.

"If everyone honestly put their hands up to it, musicians included, it would just be astounding how many millions of people there are in this country who are using some drug or other, whether prescribed or otherwise. One in four women is on Valium, for instance.

"There are so many misconceptions surrounding drugs. For example, ask any doctor who knows about it which of these people you would rather have helping you in an operation, and in what order – a heroin addict, an alcoholic, a speed freak and a barbiturate user. I think they'd choose barbiturate users and alcoholics last. They'd go for the heroin addict, and maybe the amphetamine user, first!"

Spectrum's new album, "Soul Kiss (Glide Divine)" is out now on Silvertone